

# Section 4

## Farmland and Open Space Preservation

*This section outlines the most appropriate strategies for preserving farm and open land in and around the city of Palmer. The first part recommends tools to control the development of the farmland with supporting funding scenarios and approaches. The second part of the section describes one specific strategy for preserving open land around the City of Palmer.*

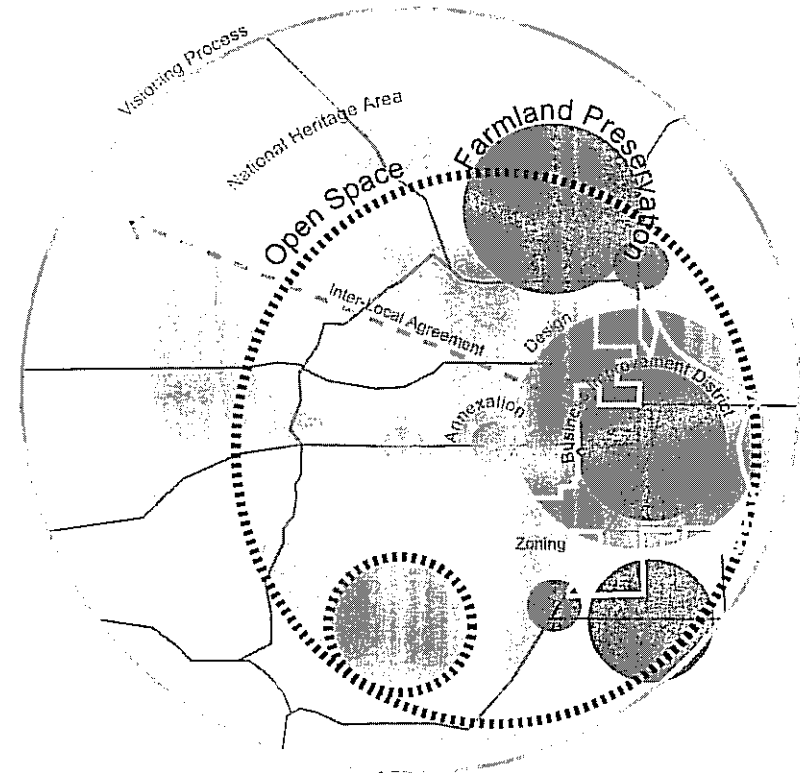
Some of the most productive farmland in the Mat-Su Borough is within Palmer and the Springer Loop and Farm Loop areas adjacent to Palmer. These farmlands have become Palmer icons and are valued by the community. Their quiet and green attracts many residents to live in these areas. Unfortunately, the rapid development occurring around the city of Palmer is resulting in a loss of this farm and open land as the pressure on farmers to sell or develop their land is too great to overcome without additional resources. If the community wishes to slow this trend and preserve their rural landscape, strategies to shape and control development should be implemented as soon as possible.

### Related Working Goals

Shape the character and channel the direction of growth into city limits in order to maintain and enhance Palmer's working rural landscape and small-town identity.

Enhance Palmer's social and economic vitality by promoting downtown commercial growth and community development.

Identify and prioritize farmland facing development pressure and establish mechanisms to preserve identified farmland.



### Recommendation

Pass a local bond measure to establish a fund to preserve farmland through tools such as the purchasing of land outright or its development rights.

There are many different tools that can be adopted to control development. The City has explored annexing the Springer Loop area as a means of preserving farmland and controlling growth. However, fearing a loss of development rights and a decrease in the value of their land farmers have understandably expressed their opposition to any annexation. While annexation can be a valuable tool for controlling growth it is not recommended as the most appropriate strategy for preserving farmland. The community, the City and interested farmers need to consider tools that preserve farmland while fairly compensating farmers for their development rights. A course of action that seems to be particularly relevant to Palmer is to pass a local bond measure to establish a fund to preserve farmland through tools such as the purchasing of land outright or its development rights.

Many communities have successfully used bond initiatives to preserve open space and farmlands. The community, the City and the farmers benefit from the initiative and the cost of preservation doesn't fall to one entity. A successful bond initiative would demonstrate the community's commitment to preserving its historic and cultural heritage, its rural character, and its support for farmers. A bond initiative could also postpone a farmer's decision to sell their property knowing there was a promising option to preserve it. Additionally, a successful bond initiative could lay the foundation for creating a land trust in Palmer.

A land trust can facilitate the purchase of development rights, the purchase of land, and be a resource for creative development design for farmers or developers interested in preserving and developing

land. If structured as a non-profit entity, it can also pursue grant funding from the Federal Government or the Farm Bill and use its status to diversify partnerships. Several land trusts operating in Alaska and near Palmer provide examples for successful and effective land trusts.

### Example - Purchasing development rights:

The example opposite explains how the process of purchasing development rights may work and the funding opportunities involved. It should be noted that figures are for example only and should be not be interpreted as true market values

It is important to note that:

- The sale of land to a land trust is voluntary
- Farmers retain ownership of their land
- The land trust retains the rights to development
- Farms can remain working farms in perpetuity

### \$1 Million Bond Issue:

If the city passed a bond measure for \$1 million, at the current rates of interest (4.25%) it would cost the city \$60,000 per year to finance the bond.

This money could provide seed money for a land trust which could then be used to leverage \$1 million in federal funds. This would equal a total of \$2 million for the purchase of development rights.

### The Potential

At \$10,000/acre for developable land, the bond measure could enable the land trust to preserve approximately 12-13 40 acre farms, as working farms, as open land. A total of 500 acres of Palmer's surrounding rural landscape could potentially be preserved if the community of Palmer acts on this recommendation.



**The value of a 40 acre farm:**

Agricultural Value at \$2000.00 per acre	= \$ 80,000.00
Development Value at \$10,000.00 per acre	= \$400,000.00
Value of Development Rights	= \$320,000.00

**To preserve the farmland the City or a land trust could:**

**Option 1:**

Purchase the land outright = \$400,000.00  
*this land could be either leased to a farmer or preserved as open space*

**Option 2:**

Purchase the development rights = \$320,000.00  
*the farmer retains ownership of the land, but is restricted to using it for farming - the land trust holds the rights*

**Financing for either of these options could be done in several ways**

**A**  
 The land trust/bond issue provides all funds = \$400,000.00  
*as option 1*

**B**  
 50% matching fund = \$160,000.00  
*The land trust acquires matching funds from the Federal Government via the Farm Bill*

Land trust provides remaining 50% = \$160,000.00  
*as option 2*

**C**  
 50% matching fund = \$160,000.00  
 Farmer donates % of development rights = X%  
*Farmer gets tax write-off*

Land trust provides remaining 50% = \$160,000.00 minus X%  
*as option 2*

## Prioritizing farmland to be preserved

To effectively and strategically apply these tools to farmland preservation, the community needs to identify and prioritize farmlands for preservation. The accompanying map suggests one approach to prioritizing farmlands; it proposes that all colony and working farms are a priority for preservation. However, farmlands in the Rural Gateway, Springer Loop, and Farm Loop areas are a higher priority due to their contribution as a gateway into Palmer and/or the increasing development pressure they are experiencing. Additionally, many of these farms are heritage and colony farms still being worked.

The strategy of using a bond measure to establish a fund to purchasing development rights through a land trust is not the only method communities have used to preserve farmland. There are many other tactics that could be applied. A list of the different measures with examples of their successful use is included in Appendix I. However, after listening to the community and the farmers the recommended approach seems the most appropriate for Palmer in its desire to strategically manage growth in the future.

Ebey's Landing in Washington is a successful and effective example of how various entities can work toward common and individual goals to preserve farmland and open space and ensure farmer's development rights are retained or fairly compensated. The entities involved in the Ebey's Landing effort are resources included in the Toolbox. The trail system that winds through the community and links the various lands was the inspiration for the proposed Springer Loop Trail. Information regarding Ebey's Landing is located at the end of this Section.

## Open Space Preservation

The Palmer community's concern over urbanization and the displacement of open space - agricultural lands, resource lands, and recreational lands - is driven by its cultural heritage and outdoor ethic. Land conversion to an economic highest and best use threatens the resource properties valued by the greater Palmer community. The loss of open land takes place gradually; bit by bit, slowly land is converted to a more intensive use and its resource, scenic or recreational use may be lost. During the information-gathering process, a number of individuals expressed a desire to manage growth in the area to protect "valued lands". The city does not have the resources or the jurisdiction to manage many of the areas of concern; most open land around Palmer is under the borough's authority, and although the borough has platting power, it does not have zoning authority or resources for ordinance enforcement. A solution to this issue is to create an Open Land District.

### Recommendation

Create a Special Purpose District to form partnerships and employ methods of preserving areas of open space.

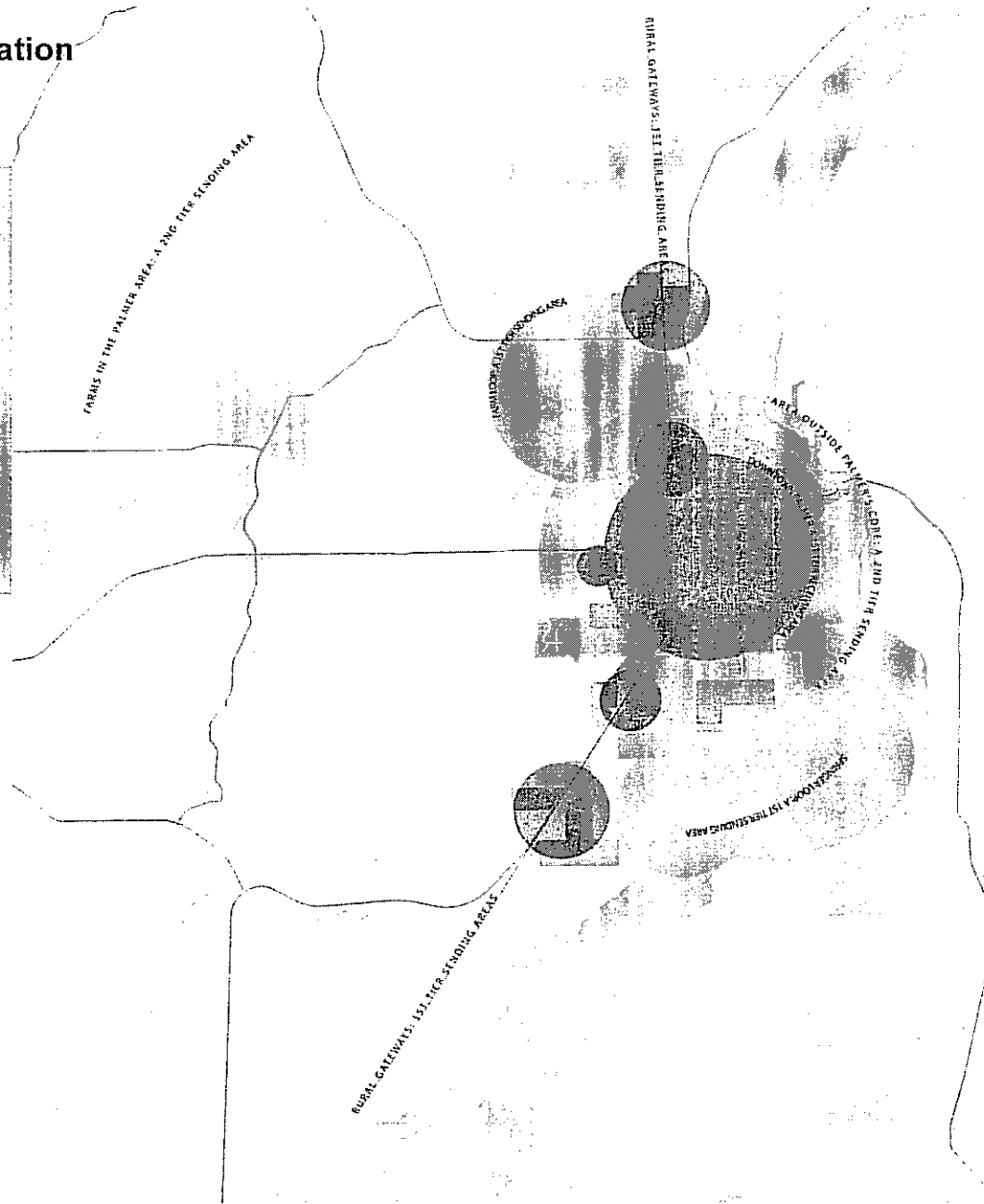
## Open Land Districts

Open Land Districts (OLDs) are Special Purpose Districts created to preserve land from development (many OLDs in the lower 48 also include preserving farmland in their charter)<sup>1</sup>. Open Land Districts vary in purpose and jurisdictional scope, but generally they are local public agencies that acquire land or interests in land from willing sellers to protect open space. Some OLDs concentrate on agricultural land for preservation, while others emphasize public



## Working Farmland Prioritization

If the recommended bond measure is accepted, the community will need to initiate a process to prioritize farmland on the basis of its preservation value. The accompanying map is an example of potential preservation areas. Dark green areas indicate rural gateways and light green areas indicate farmland under threat.



access and recreation. The activities of most OLDs are guided by an elected board of directors that is incorporated through the cooperative efforts of a region's cities, counties, and voters. Property owners who convey interests in their land to open space districts can receive direct payment and/or tax benefits. Like many conservation organizations that deal with interests in land, open space districts generally have the flexibility to negotiate transactions that achieve the goals of all involved.

This narrow focus solely on open land administration provides Open Land Districts with an advantage over city and borough governments when it comes to saving open areas. Since cities and counties have multiple and competing service objectives, open space funding within such governments can sometimes be diverted to other pressing needs. An Open Land District's revenues, on the other hand, may only be spent for open space purposes. This encourages a steady flow of funding for the long-term implementation of an open



space plan.

Open Land Districts can be authorized to levy special taxes, generally subject to a two-thirds voter approval. In addition, they may receive land grants and gifts and may employ debt financing measures such as general obligation bonds. They may also lease real estate as part of their preservation activities. For instance, to save agricultural land, they may purchase farms or grazing ranges and lease them back to farmers and ranchers. Regional districts, such as the Marin Open Space District, sometimes employ the services of land conservation trusts in acquiring open space. An example of jurisdictional boundaries for an Open Land District could be to use the same boundaries as the Fire Protection District.

Appropriate funding mechanisms for the Palmer area should be tied to the concept that new development should pay for its impacts – that is: new development impinges on valuable open land. Levying an impact fee on new development permits within the Open Land District could raise funds for purchase of land, easements, or development rights without raising taxes on existing community members, yet everyone can benefit. Other funding mechanisms can include taxation, bonds, or grants. Further strategies are detailed in Appendix I.

As an example of how farm and open space preservation works together, what follows are two projects that bridge farm and open land preservation, capitalizing on tourism goals while preserving open land:

### **Trails for Springer Loop**

Palmer residents and visitors value the scenic beauty of the farms in the Springer Loop system, but farmers may sometimes be affected by people trespassing on their fields, inadvertently stepping on plants or leaving behind material that can damage expensive farm equipment.



Proposed trails link up with an planned trail along the railroad right-of-way.

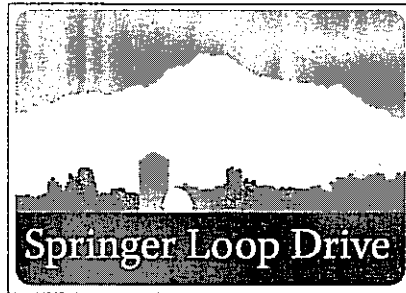
An existing foot path near the airport connects with a new trail at the edge of land slated for new sub-divisions.

New hedgerows separate subdivisions from farmland, and serve as windbreaks and snow fences.

Interpretative signs on the Springer Loop scenic drive reveal Palmer's past—and connect visitors and tourists with modern farms and farm

An easement along the Outer Springer Loop road provides room for a new bike path.

A possible solution could be a trail system that provides access for hikers and a buffer separating residential areas and working farms. A trail system could connect Springer Loop residents with Palmer's commercial area and connect with a trail already proposed by the city of Palmer along the railroad right-of-way. This trail could also connect with the State Fairgrounds and a proposed interpretative farm at the former Rebarchek Farm property, so that visitors to the area could also hike or bike along the trail to enjoy the views.



### Springer Loop Drive

In addition to the proposed trails, this plan seeks to enhance the value of working farms in the Springer Loop system by creating an auto tour of the area, the Springer Loop Drive. This drive would include signs that reveal the historic significance of the area, as well as encouraging farmers to post signs labeling crops currently under cultivation. By revealing the historic and present-day importance of the area, property owners in Palmer can enhance the value of the farmland for agriculture and attract funds for conservation.

Other preservation links:  
<http://www.centerforfarmlandpreservation.org/cfp-links.html>

### Open Land District references

Special District Institute: <http://www.sdbmi.com>

California Special District Association: <http://www.csda.net/>

Marin County (CA) Open Space District:  
<http://www.marinopenspace.org/>

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (CA):  
<http://www.openspace.org/default.asp>

Sonoma County (CA) Agricultural and Open Space District:  
<http://www.sonoma-county.org/opensp/district/about.asp>

Muskegon (MI) Open Space District Code:  
<http://www.ci.muskegon.mi.us/community/zoning/zoningord/articleXVIIOSR.pdf>

Westerville (OH) Open Space District Code:  
<http://www.ci.westerville.oh.us/CHAPTER1165.asp>

### Related Appendices: I, J, K

## References and Information

### Farmland references

Ebey's Landing: <http://www.nps.gov/ebla/home.htm>

Farmland Information Center:  
[http://www.farmlandinfo.org/farmland\\_preservation\\_literature/](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/farmland_preservation_literature/)

### Notes

1. For example, the Sonoma County (CA) Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and the Westerville (OH) Open Space District - see the References and Information box above for additional information.

